



Royal Commission on the Historical  
Monuments of England  
Brooklands  
24 Brooklands Avenue  
Cambridge CB2 2BU  
Telephone: 01223 324010

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**A CAUSEWAYED ENCLOSURE  
ON COMBE HILL,  
EASTBOURNE, EAST SUSSEX**

**An Earthwork Survey by  
The Royal Commission on the  
Historical Monuments of England**

**ENCLOSURE AND INDUSTRY IN THE NEOLITHIC**

**March 1995**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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In early March 1995 the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England surveyed the well-preserved earthworks of a causewayed enclosure on Combe Hill (TQ 5750 0222), as part of the project to record Enclosure and Industry in the Neolithic Period. Combe Hill lies 1.5kms to the west of the village of Willingdon in the Eastbourne district of East Sussex.

The enclosure is located conspicuously on the crest of the scarp slope of the South Downs, at the point where the chalk range swings southwards towards Beachy Head. The main earthworks occupy a slight saddle at a height of 190m above OD, overlooking the steep northern escarpment of the downs; Bronze Age barrows stand on the eminences to east and west (see Figure 2, profile). The enclosure consists of a penannular inner causewayed bank and ditch, completed on the north side by the natural scarp of the combe, and apparently discontinuous sections of an outer earthwork. The site, which is now under the management of Eastbourne Borough Council, is protected as a Scheduled Ancient Monument (E SUSX 67a) and is recorded in the National Monuments Record as TQ 50 SE 12.

The Neolithic date of the causewayed enclosure has been confirmed by excavations by R Musson in 1949 and V Seton-Williams in 1962. The earthworks now lie under typical downland pasture and the hilltop does not appear to have ever been subject to intensive agriculture.

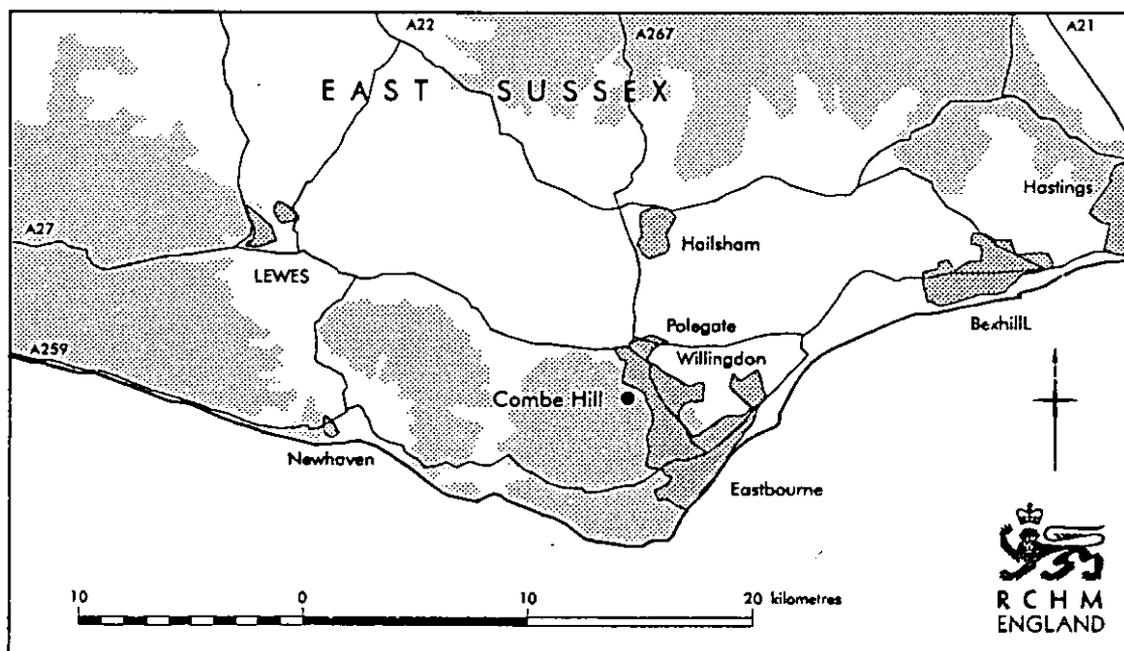


Figure 1: Location map

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## 2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

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### **The causewayed enclosure**

The earliest depiction of Combe Hill, by the Ordnance Survey (First Edition surveyed 1873, published 1875), portrays the enclosure as a more or less continuous bank and ditch, interrupted only by a track. Allcroft (1916) mentions the 'unusual plan' but does not illustrate it.

In 1929, Mrs Keiller identified Combe Hill as another probable causewayed enclosure and pointed it out to EC Curwen. Following his first season of excavations at The Trundle, he carried out a detailed analytical survey, which recorded sixteen causeways across the inner ditch, often corresponding with breaks in the bank. These he interpreted as the interfaces between separate gangs of workers (Curwen 1930; 1931). He later remarked that the coincidence between causeways in the ditch and breaks in the bank was unusual (Curwen 1954, 87-8). An aerial photograph of the site taken by Major Allen in the 1930's adds little to the interpretation of the earthworks (NMR a).

In 1949, the Eastbourne Natural History and Archaeology Society, under the direction of R Musson, excavated two trenches along the western side of the inner earthwork, slight traces of which can still be identified on the ground (for location, see plan surveyed at 1: 1000 scale). The first trench examined the internal bank, finding no evidence for any superstructure. The second, along the adjacent ditch, revealed a causeway of undisturbed chalk with ditch segments of differing dimensions on either side (Musson 1950). The shallower of the two ditch segments produced only a deposit of unworked flint and a few sherds of Early Iron Age or Romano-British coarse wares from the upper fills. The primary fill of the deeper segment was a thick layer of sterile silt, which was thicker on the side closer to the bank, but the layer above contained occupation debris including nearly a thousand sherds of pottery, some animal bone, a fragment of quernstone, a leaf-shaped arrowhead, an end scraper and at least four hundred waste flakes. The pottery was analysed by Piggott and interpreted as Middle to Late Neolithic and comparable to Ebbsfleet ware. However, he later dated the enclosure to the earlier Neolithic, suggesting that the pottery represented the initial impact of migration, or later re-occupation of the site (Piggott 1954, 17-32). Charcoal from a supposed hearth was identified by JC Maby as including ash, hazel and hawthorn, species which appear to contradict the molluscan evidence in that they suggest woodland regeneration.

While Smith also suggested that the pottery at Combe Hill, as well as that at Windmill Hill and Whitehawk, resulted from secondary depositions (Smith 1971), Drewett argued that it could in fact be an early type, the use of which was specialised and restricted to causewayed enclosures and long barrows (Drewett 1975). A radio-carbon determination of  $2640 \pm 110$ bc (calibrated 3400 BC) (I-II, 613) obtained from the underlying primary silt dates the deposit to the Middle Neolithic (Drewett and Bedwin 1981). An analysis of the *mollusca* from a small soil sample indicated 36.4% shade-loving, 22.7% *Pomatias Elegans* (which is associated with woodland clearance), 31.8% Catholic and 9.1% open country species suggesting that the enclosure had been constructed soon after the clearance of the area (Thomas 1982; Drewett 1994, Table 2).

In 1962, a second excavation was carried out by V Seton-Williams (Drewett 1994), as a training project for twenty volunteers. Two main trenches A and B (which can still be traced on the ground) were dug through the inner and outer earthworks on the east of the enclosure, together with nineteen smaller trenches elsewhere along the eastern side; an aerial photograph shows the excavations in progress (NMR b). The profile revealed by trench A may indicate one re-cut, but the primary infilling appears to have been rapid natural silting. The finds from the upper silts of trench A include a total of ninety-two worked flints, a leaf shaped arrowhead and possibly a few sherds of Romano-British coarse ware. Trench B apparently contained no Neolithic material, but thirty-five sherds of Romano-British pottery, some coming from a later shallow pit cut into the top of the ditch. The other trenches for the most part confirmed the process of initial rapid silting, followed by more gradual silting, probably under grass cover. Trench D in the interior recovered no features or finds. Trenches at E, which examined another section of the ditch, recovered a carefully placed deposit of three polished flint axes, in the layer immediately above the primary silt. Trenches F encountered no features to indicate that there had been any continuation of the earthwork across the natural scarp. Of the total of sixty-one sherds, thirty-five are probably Romano-British, and the remainder would all fit a Beaker context. Of the total of 648 flakes which remain for analysis, 61% are primary flakes and 36% secondary, the paucity of tools perhaps indicating that they were roughed out to be finished elsewhere (Drewett, Rudling & Gardiner 1988, 39-40).

In 1974, a field observation carried out by Ordnance Survey identified very slight traces of a possible third concentric earthwork to the south-west of the main earthworks, which is discussed further below (NMR c).

### **The round barrows**

Three Bronze Age round barrows - two bowl barrows and one disc barrow - were first identified by the Ordnance Survey (First Edition surveyed 1873, published 1875) and have been resurveyed by Curwen, Grinsell (1934) and Ordnance Survey. Of these, only the larger bowl barrow has been investigated; a trench resulting from excavations by Major F Maitland in 1908 is still clearly visible (Grinsell 1934, 273-4). Three broken bronze flanged axes and a fragment of a fourth were found beneath a massive stone some 0.3m (10 inches) below the surface of the top. However, the smaller bowl barrow has evidence for antiquarian excavation or looting, though none is documented.

### **Romano-British material**

In addition to the Romano-British pottery mentioned above, which was found by Musson and Seton-Williams in the upper fills of the Neolithic ditch, considerable quantities of coarse and fine wares and coins dating from the mid-3rd century to 317 AD were found in the area to the west of the causewayed enclosure in the 1940's (Anon 1941, 108-10; 1946-7, 55 & 114-15). A hoard of 144 coins, with a few more in the immediate area, was recently found by metal detector on the northern slopes of Combe Hill. The latest issue was of Tetricus I, dating to about 273 AD (Rudling 1984).

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### 3. DESCRIPTION OF THE EARTHWORKS

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For names and letters which appear in bold in the text, see RCHME earthwork plan surveyed at 1:1000 scale. There is relatively good aerial photographic coverage of the site, which gives a good sense of the topographical location but adds no further detail to the earthworks (NMR d; e).

#### **The causewayed enclosure**

The causewayed enclosure consists of a penannular inner causewayed bank and ditch, completed on the north side by the natural scarp of the combe, and apparently discontinuous sections of an outer earthwork. Possible traces of a third, much slighter earthwork have also been identified. No features could be identified in the interior, which is slightly domed as a result of the natural topography.

The inner earthwork encloses an oval area of 0.53ha, measuring 90m west to east by 70m transversely. It is formed by an internal bank between 4.0m and 7.0m wide and up to 0.6m high with an external ditch between 3.0m and 5.0m wide and up to 0.7m deep; there is no evidence for any berm between the two. As Curwen's percussion survey recorded, sixteen possible causeways across the ditch can be identified, although only five appear to be completely undug, the others being undulations of variable size in its base. In addition there are numerous other minor irregularities in the form of the ditch. All but three of the causeways across the ditch coincide with complete or partial breaks in the internal bank. Most of the interruptions range from 2.0m to 5.0m wide but there are larger openings: on the east (a total interruption in both features some 10m wide, confirmed by Seton-Williams' Trench C), on the south (some 11m wide but with possible indications of levelling of the bank and backfilling of the ditch), and on the west (a complete interruption in both features some 4m wide but probably resulting in part from erosion by the northernmost track). The variable nature of the ditch has been confirmed by excavation; the two sections investigated by Musson were 0.3m and 0.9m deep. Seton-Williams' excavations suggested a more constant depth but a very variable profile, with some evidence for re-cutting. However, the course of the earthwork as a whole forms a smooth and regular curve. On the north side, there is no trace of any earthwork for a distance of 45m, and Seton-Williams' Trenches F encountered no sub-surface features but the naturally steep escarpment completes the enclosure. There are intermittent traces, most notably on the eastern and south-western sides, of a counterscarp bank no more than 0.1m high.

The outer earthwork consists of a length of causewayed bank and ditch some 65m long on the west and an isolated single segment of bank and ditch some 12m long on the east, linked on the southern side by a very slight scarp no more than 0.2m high. The outer enclosure is not perfectly concentric with the inner earthwork, reaching a maximum distance of 24m from it on the west and approaching to 12m on the southern side. The two well-preserved sections of the bank and ditch on the west and east have similar dimensions to the inner earthwork. The western section of ditch is interrupted by three causeways, two of which correspond to partial breaks in the bank and the third of which corresponds to a complete break, though this may be at least partly the result of erosion by the northernmost trackway. There are traces of numerous other irregularities in the form of the ditch. The earthwork appears to terminate some 10m south of the natural scarp of the combe. The isolated segment of bank and ditch on the east has similar dimensions, but is now deformed by the backfilling of Seton-Williams' Trench B. A slight scarp to the north of the segment may indicate that the earthwork turned more sharply to the north-west to join the inner enclosure; there is no evidence that it continued on the same alignment. The slight scarp which forms the southern side of the outer earthwork is not continuous and cannot certainly be interpreted as part of the Neolithic enclosure. However, in places there are slight hollows and irregularities in the form of the scarp which suggest that it may originally have been a similar causewayed earthwork. Curwen detected one isolated ditch segment due south of the enclosure, using his percussion technique, which could not be confirmed by RCHME.

There are two earthworks which lie between the inner and outer enclosures and may be associated with the Neolithic monument. On the south-east, an irregular sub-rectangular depression, some 6.7m wide by 11.2m long and 0.4m deep, has mounds of material both to its north-west and south-east. On the north-west an isolated circular hollow 5.5m in diameter and 0.2m deep lies on the edge of the natural scarp of the combe some 10m from the inner earthwork. Only the degraded appearance of this hollow suggests that it may be contemporary with the other earthworks.

Some 30m to the west of the causewayed enclosure, a broad, low bank was first noted by the Ordnance Survey in 1973 (NMR b) and interpreted as a possible third element of the enclosure or a later lynchet. The bank has average dimensions of 10.0m wide and 0.2m high and is fairly straight, extending for a distance of 105m from south-east to north-west. Its alignment coincides with an irregular strip of gorse and other scrub. At its northern end the bank is overlain by an oval mound, 12.5m south-west to north-east by 8.2m wide and 0.5m high. The relationship of the bank to the larger bowl barrow is unclear. Some 30m to the east of the enclosure, the RCHME survey identified slight

traces of a comparable earthwork. The most appreciable element of this is a bank between 5.0m and 7.5m wide and 0.1m high, which appears to underlie the disc barrow and extend for some 40m northwards to the edge of the natural scarp. Minimal scarps associated with the main bank may indicate a more complex earthwork, curving slightly to the north-west.

#### **The round barrows**

TQ 5768 0227. A **bowl barrow** is located on the summit of the rise some 200m to the east of the causewayed enclosure. The barrow is circular with a diameter of 15.5m and maximum height of 1.2m. A trench, resulting from antiquarian excavation or looting, cuts into its northern side. There are remnants of a ditch 0.1m deep on the western and eastern sides, possibly with a slight bank on its exterior.

TQ 5762 0224. A well-preserved **disc barrow** lies some 120m to the east of the causewayed enclosure and appears to overlie what may be a third circuit. The inconspicuous location of the barrow, below the highest point of the adjacent hill and some distance from the crest of the natural slope, is otherwise somewhat unusual. Grinsell (1934) revised Curwen's original terminology, calling the barrow a ring barrow on the grounds that no central tump could be seen. However, there are very slight indications of its possible position, which is slightly acentral, and Curwen's term has therefore been retained. The barrow is almost circular, with a maximum diameter of 20.0m, which is smaller than most discs. It is formed by an external bank 2.5m wide and 0.3m high with an internal ditch 3.0m wide and 0.2m deep. Curwen's percussion technique suggested that there had been a central pit.

TQ 5736 0223. A large **bowl barrow** occupies the crest of the slight rise or spur to the west of the causewayed enclosure. The barrow is almost circular with a diameter of 21.0m and a maximum height of 1.6m. The encircling ditch, which ranges from 3.0m to 4.5m wide and has a maximum depth of 0.4m, appears to be interrupted by causeways on the western and eastern sides. As mentioned above, the trench resulting from a documented excavation carried out in 1908 is clearly visible, crossing the barrow from south-east to north-west. Minor disturbance around the base of the barrow may result from metal detecting (Holden unpublished c.1975).

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#### 4. INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

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The awkwardness of the siting of the enclosure on Combe Hill in relation to the natural topography has for long been regarded as typical of the Sussex causewayed enclosures. The characteristic was first noted by Curwen (1930, 49) and Smith (1971, 92) comments that the whole class of monument has 'the appearance of predetermined plans carried out regardless of topography'. The conspicuous location is common to most of the upland enclosures (Drewett, Rudling and Gardiner 1988, 35; Drewett 1994), but the slight saddle which the Combe Hill earthwork occupies is more unusual, the closest parallel being Whitehawk (TQ 330 048), although a number of sites occupy ridges (such as Hambledon Hill ST 849 122) or stand back from the tips of spurs rather than occupying the highest ground. The completion of the earthwork by the natural scarp also occurs at Hambledon Hill (ST 849 122), Crickley Hill (SO 927 161), Knap Hill (SU 121636) and probably at nearby Offham Hill (TQ 399 113) (Drewett 1977, 203). Smith (1971, Table 1) suggests that the enclosure has a northerly aspect; it is certain that its location is most striking seen from the north and that the broadest prospect *from* the enclosure lies in that direction (and may have been the only view available if the environs of the site remained forested - see Drewett, Rudling and Gardiner 1988, 36). However, the clearest view into the interior of the enclosure is now presented from the approach along the ridgetop to the south-east, and from Bourne Hill and Willingdon Hill 1.0kms to the south. Since the limit of the clearing in which the enclosure was constructed is uncertain, and in any case did not necessarily remain static, this may have been significant.

The oval plan of the Combe Hill enclosure is typical of the majority of causewayed enclosures. The size of the central area enclosed is not much smaller than that encompassed by the inner circuits of the Wessex sites, which are in some cases much larger overall. Its dimensions are close to those of the inner earthwork at Whitehawk, which encloses an area of approximately 0.77ha, and slightly smaller than The Trundle (SU 877 110), which encloses 0.95ha. Curwen's initial interpretation of the earthwork segments with variable dimensions as the work of separate gangs, and indeed the evidence for selective re-cutting which is frequently found on other sites, suggest a piecemeal approach to the construction of these monuments (Evans 1988), but this is denied by the smooth curves of the enclosure as a whole. The fact that the outer earthwork is not perfectly concentric and the possibility that it curved more sharply inwards to join the inner earthwork on the east may indicate an element of spiralling,

which was first suggested by Curwen (1931) at The Trundle and may be a feature of other causewayed enclosures. Of the two sections of earthwork which may form a third enclosure, the slight feature to the east of the enclosure seems more likely to be contemporary, since it appears to underlie the disc barrow and curves parallel to the main earthworks. The bank to the west of the enclosure seems more likely to have been, or possibly to have been re-used as, a field boundary or lynchet, a possibility considered by Ordnance Survey in 1971 (NMR c). Ploughing may also have taken place on the southern slope of the hill - this might account for the slightness of the outer earthwork (and possibly the absence of any trace of the putative third earthwork); however, the limit of any such ploughing is uncertain, suggesting that it was probably relatively brief or un-intensive. Alternatively, it is possible that the outer earthwork was always as discontinuous and slight as it now appears or that it was deliberately levelled in the Neolithic period, which seems to have been an important part of the activity on other sites (Smith 1965, 15-17; 1966, 471-4).

Curwen's (1954, 87-8) observation that there is an unusually high coincidence between causeways across the ditch and partial or complete breaks in the bank holds good. The apparent lack of any berm between the bank and ditch, which is evident at Offham Hill and The Trundle, is also unusual. Musson's published section drawing (Musson 1950, figure 2) strongly suggests that the ditch was re-cut following the primary silting, and this is supported by the general variability and numerous minor irregularities evident in the superficial form of the ditch especially. Musson's discovery of two flint tablets with associated charcoal, interpreted as a 'hearth', in the middle of the upper fill also suggests that the backfilling was more complex than the section at first suggests; both these possibilities are entirely consistent with the practice of repetitive actions suggested by other sites (Smith 1971, 98). The size of the individual segments of the earthwork is broadly comparable to the other Sussex sites. The two broadest causeways, which face due east and due south, are possibly the original entrances.

The radio-carbon determination of  $2640 \pm 110$ bc (calibrated 3400 BC I-II, 613) falls within the date range of c.3000-2500bc obtained from other sites. The molluscan evidence also concurs with most of the other Sussex sites; only Whitehawk and The Trundle are thought to have been constructed in extensive clearings, while the others lay in relatively small and recent clearings (Drewett, Rudling and Gardiner 1988, 24). The function of causewayed enclosures remains a subject of debate, and each site may have encompassed a number of different communal activities, which perhaps also changed over time. Early interpretations of the Combe Hill enclosure favoured settlement and defence, although Curwen (1954, 84-5) was dubious about the defensive capability of such an earthwork. Piggott (1954) saw the monuments in terms of the seasonal

management and exploitation of cattle. More recent interpretations have largely rejected these theories and discussed Combe Hill as a possible centre of communal ritual connected with death (Smith 1971; Drewett, Rudling and Gardiner 1988, 41-3). Combe Hill lies within sight of Hunter's Burgh long barrow and Curwen noted that a concentration of nine or ten long barrows lie between Combe Hill and Whitehawk (Curwen 1954, 97-8). Evans (1988) has suggested that the nature of the ritual may be vested in the very acts of creating and re-creating the enclosure. Furthermore, ritual continuity is suggested by the proximity of the Bronze Age barrows, a phenomenon paralleled at Barkhale (SU 976 126), Bury Hill (SU 015 093) and elsewhere. In particular, the siting of the disc barrow apparently on top of the Neolithic earthwork (its position is otherwise difficult to explain) is paralleled at Whitesheet Hill (ST 802 352). The same observation may apply to the larger of the two bowl barrows.

Drewett has recently suggested that the limited artefactual evidence available from Combe Hill may indicate the symbolically structured deposition of objects around the causewayed enclosure (Drewett 1994, 24). He notes that while Musson's excavations on the western side of the enclosure produced abundant Ebbsfleet sherds, some animal bone and other 'domestic' material, Seton-Williams' excavations on the east produced no pottery earlier than the Beaker period, and no bone, but did discover the polished axes and flint-working debris, which were perhaps associated with the 'wild' forest.

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## 5. SURVEY AND RESEARCH METHODS

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The archaeological survey was carried out by Alastair Oswald and David Field of the RCHME. Control points, some archaeological features and hard detail were surveyed using a Wild TC1610 Electronic Theodolite with integral EDM. Data was captured on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module and plotted via computer on a Calcomp 3024 plotter. Most details of the plan were supplied at 1:1000 scale with Fibron tapes using normal graphical methods. The historical and archaeological background was partly researched by Kate Fernie, and the report as a whole was researched and written by Alastair Oswald and edited by Peter Topping. The site archive has been deposited in the National Monuments Record, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GZ (TQ 50 SE 12).

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# COMBE HILL, EAST SUSSEX

